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Voices
from the
Gaps

Tina McElroy Ansa

Biography

Tina McElroy Ansa was born in 1949 in Macon, Georgia, to Walter J. and Nellie McElroy. She grew up with the love and support of her mother, father, and brothers, with a little bit of special attention because she was the baby of the family. Growing up in the small, intimate community of Pleasant Hill, where her father was a business owner, Ansa grew more and more interested in storytelling. Observing her father's diverse clientele, she would wonder about their backgrounds and make them up.

Whenever her grandfather, Frank McElroy, visited Ansa's family, he would sit down, and everyone would gather around to hear him tell stories. Ansa's family also loved to read. In an interview, Ansa remembers walking up to her mother while her mother was reading, and saying, "Momma," but her mother said, "Not now baby, Momma's reading. Ansa thought to herself that if something can keep Momma from her baby then it must be wonderful.

Ansa continued her love for writing and storytelling as a student at Spelman College of Atlanta, Georgia. She graduated in 1971 with a major in English. After graduating, Ansa was the first black woman to be hired by *The Atlanta Constitution*, where she worked for eight years. Ansa held jobs as copy editor, makeup editor, layout editor, entertainment writer, feature writer and news reporter.



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1949
- * African-American novelist, essayist, and short story writer

This page was researched and submitted by Natasha Jor-dan Cornelius, Stephanie Michelle Handy, Benjamin Terrell Hubbard, Sharon Hunter, Sash J. Lodge, Mary Mears, and Myderia Pittman on 12/15/00 and edited and updated by Lauren Curtright on 2/3/05.



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Since 1982, Ansa has worked as a freelance journalist, newspaper columnist, and writing workshop instructor at Spelman College, Emory University, and Brunswick College. She is married to Jonee' Ansa, a filmmaker. They reside on St. Simons Island in Georgia, where Ansa and her husband directed the Georgia Sea Island Festival in 1989. The twenty-year-old festival displays crafts, music, food, and the cultural heritage of African Americans. Ansa enjoys gardening and is a birder and amateur naturalist.

Ansa's first novel, *Baby of the Family* (1989), focuses on a child named Lena McPherson. Lena was the last of three children and the only girl. When she was born, she had a caul, or veil, over her face, symbolizing her special powers to see in the spiritual realm. As the mother, Nellie, was giving birth to Lena, she thought, ". . .this child would be different. . . . It was a special sensation, unlike those of the births of her two sons" (Ansa 1). *Baby of the Family* focuses on Lena's coming of age, finding out who she is and why she's different but not crazy, as her brothers wanted to believe. The novel explores Lena's life as she encounters ghosts and friends of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds. Each one teaches Lena a lesson about the discovery of self. The most important lessons in this book are about the true meaning of friendship, the right to question things, and being happy with yourself even if you are different. According to Nina Burleigh, in *Chicago Tribune Books*, "Lena discovers all the things children learn whether they are supposed to or not; lessons about the fleeting nature of girlhood friendships, the pleasures of sex, a mother's broken heart, the insidiousness of racism and the effects of alcohol."

The novel closes with Lena's seeing her grandmother's ghost, who explains Lena's birth and ability to see ghosts. Her grandmother convinces Lena that she is not crazy, that she possesses special powers to see into the spiritual realm. *Baby of the Family* is currently being made into a movie filmed in Macon and other parts of southern Georgia. In 1989, the novel was the Georgia Authors Series Award winner, was named a notable Book of the Year by *The New York Times*, and was on the African American Best Sellers List for Paperback Fiction. It is included in the Georgia Center for the Book's 2002 list "The Top 25 Books Every Georgian Should Read."



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Ansa's second novel, *Ugly Ways* (1993), also takes place in the mythical town of Mulberry, Georgia. Three black sisters, Betty, Annie Ruth, and Emily, along with Esther Lovejoy, the mother, are the main characters. Esther, "Mudear," has died but her spirit refuses to die. The storyline centers on the daughters making preparations for their mother's funeral; in the process, they analyze how "Mudear" has impacted their lives. Betty is the owner of two beauty salons and knew the "old Mudear before the change."

As the story continues, Mudear spends her days sleeping and watching television and her nights in her garden while her husband, Ernest, works everyday in the chalk mines to support the family. Mudear teaches the girls to be successful and to live independent lives, while Ernest fades away from them, muttering, "women takin' over my house." Mudear's strong will to be her own person and depend on no one, especially a man, had a double effect: her daughters found it difficult to love and trust men, but they were very successful women. It was during the funeral and afterwards that Mudear's spirit decides that her girls sure had some "ugly ways," talking about how she had negatively influenced them in certain aspects of life. Ironically, it could be said that Mudear also had some "ugly ways" if one considers how she raised her daughters. Mudear taught the girls special lessons that were not understood by them until after her death.

Ugly Ways was on the African American Best Sellers/Blackboard List for more than two years. It was recognized as Best Fiction by the same group in 1994, and it is included in the Georgia Center for the Book's 2005 list "The Top 25 Books Every Georgian Should Read." *Ugly Ways* is also under consideration for screen production. Ansa said, "In my novel *Ugly Ways* I try to expand the canvas of American literature to include a mother, a black mother, who challenges the 'conventional wisdom,' the accepted line on what 'mother' is and means in African American culture. To record, examine, and push the parameters of our lives is, I believe, the job and duty of literature" (*Contemporary Authors*, 12).



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The Hand I Fan With (1996) is Ansa's third novel and begins where *Baby of the Family* ends. Although in *The Hand I Fan With*, Lena is an adult, she reminisces about her childhood and how she came to be the woman she is. *The Hand I Fan With* is an erotic love story about Lena and her man, Herman, a ghost. In the novel, Lena's life is wonderful; she is financially stable and has a large beautiful home, the latest car, and expensive clothes, but she is lonely. Lena is portrayed as an individual who will freely give a person whatever one needs and desires. She helps orphan kids, donates to charities, helps people in her neighborhood, and participates in all church functions. One could say that Lena stretches herself too thin, or that she is "the hand that everyone fans with." Personally, Lena is a lonely woman who cannot seem to find the right man. Then, the ever-elusive Herman slides into her life. Herman is everything Lena desires in a man.

Deep down inside she knows why Herman has come. Herman and Lena make passionate love and bond deeply. Herman also makes her realize that she should not be "the hand that everyone fans with." He makes her understand that she should put her own needs before everyone else's. The novel explores Lena's sexuality, but as Ansa describes it, "It explores how one lives as well as how one loves." Ansa says, "This is a woman's story of giving too much to others without thought for self. It is the story of how many of us women live our lives in a rush of accumulating and sacrificing" (Letter to my Readers).

Ansa has written a fourth novel, *You Know Better* (2002). It focuses on the children of today and adults relationships with them. Ansa has also written essays and short stories. "Women and the Movement" and "Sarah" are two of her essays; the latter one is a chapter in her novel *Baby of the Family*. Ansa also wrote a short story entitled "Willie Bea and Jaybird: A Love Story," which is in the anthology *You Haven't To Deserve*, a collection of fiction by twenty-two Georgia authors, published in 1991. Her short fiction is also included in *Calling the Wind: 20th Century African American Short Stories*, *Women of the 20th Century: Thirty Short Stories By Women*, and *Wild Women Don't Wear No Blues*.



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Ansa has also written for many magazines and newspapers, including *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Florida Times Union*, and *New York Newsday*, *Essence*, *Callaloo*, and *Catalyst* magazine. Ansa continues to lecture and read at universities and conferences, such as the College Language Association Conference and Paine College. She is also a regular contributor to the CBS Sunday Morning Series with her essays “Postcards from Georgia.” In 2004, Ansa founded the first annual Sea Island Writers Retreats on Sapelo Island off the coast of Georgia to help emerging and established writers hone their work and craft. The second annual retreats take place in August, September, and November 2005.

In 2005, Tina McElroy Ansa was named the recipient of the Stanley W. Lindberg Award for her body of work and contributions to the cultural and literary life of Georgia.

Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

Books

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